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Innovation Beyond Institutions: New Projects and Challenges for Government Information Service Institutions in Japan

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Abstract

This paper attempts to present an overview of and discuss innovations in main government information service institutions in Japan—the National Diet Library (NDL) and the National Archives of Japan (NAJ)—in the electronic environment. This paper examines two approaches of the NDL and the NAJ toward innovative projects: (1) retrospective digitization of historical publications and documents and (2) treatment of born-digital information. It then proposes a desirable strategy for the NDL and the NAJ, as well as government information service institutions in other countries, to aid them in “innovation beyond institutions.” This strategy involves (1) collaboration in the management of information systems and (2) cooperation between government libraries and government archives.

Introduction: Government Information Service Institutions and Their Roles

Although this paper is being presented at the IFLA Government Libraries Section and the theme of the session is “innovation,” this paper considers innovation not only at government libraries but also at government archives. This is because, as discussed

later, both government libraries and archives encounter similar challenges in and require similar innovations for the treatment of government information in the electronic environment. Therefore, this paper defines “government information service institutions” as government libraries, which deal with government publications (including government websites), and government archives, which deal with non-published government records. Such institutions assume the responsibility of organizing and managing government information resources and providing associated services.

These resources and services are valuable in terms of the following:

- Accountability to the citizens. Government information is evidence of the actions of and manner in which the government acted or did not act. For citizens, it is necessary to investigate the past actions of the government through such evidence.
- Knowledge base for policy making. While “accountability” is important to citizens, the policy making function is important for both government officials and citizens. In other words, they investigate the past actions of the government through government information and use this information to formulate policies that address current issues.
- Historical and cultural heritage. Government information includes reliable information on the community, ranging from geographic and demographic data to still and motion pictures that reflect the contemporary lives of citizens. If archived, such information serves as the historical and cultural heritage of the community.
- Instruments for academic research. Government information is a valuable research tool in the fields of history, politics, economics, etc.

Thus, government information service institutions serve both government officials and citizens.

This paper aims to present an overview of and discuss innovations in government information service institutions in Japan. The author has already published several research articles concerning government information in Japan^{1 2}. While these previous articles discussed information policy issues, this paper is concerned with the current activities of government information service institutions supported by such policies.

Government Information Service Institutions in Japan

In Japan, the National Diet Library (NDL) and the National Archives of Japan (NAJ) are the two major government information service institutions.

In 1949, the NDL was established as a branch of the National Diet (Parliament) and as the successor to the Imperial Library and the libraries of the Imperial Diet. One of the important components of the NDL is its legal deposit system. The objects of the legal deposit system include all new publications in Japan, including books, pamphlets, serial publications, musical scores, maps, and phonographic records. The publications covered by this system also include any “electronic publication,” i.e., “Texts, images, sounds, or programs recorded by electronic, magnetic, or other methods which cannot be directly perceived by human senses”³. However, under the current law, this definition reflects an interpretation of electronic materials as tangible, thus excluding government websites

and other types of networked information.

Of the various objects of the legal deposit system, government publications are given special treatment in terms of the following⁴:

- Number of copies. While private publishers are required to deposit one copy of each publication, government agencies must deposit up to 30 copies of their publications with the NDL.
- The reason for depositing publications. Government publications are deposited for official purposes, such as to aid the research activities of the NDL for the benefit of the Diet members, and for their use in exchange for the publications of other governments.

Another feature of the NDL concerning government information is its Branch Library System set up in government agencies. While the NDL has been a branch of the Diet since its establishment, branch libraries have been instituted at each administrative agency as a gateway of the deposit system for each agency's publications as well as a service point for the agency's staff. Currently, there are 25 branches at various administrative bodies as well as one branch at the Supreme Court⁵.

On the other hand, the NAJ was established in 1971 as a part of the Prime Minister's Office, and it became an independent administrative agency in 2001. The NAJ, through its facilities, is responsible for the acceptance of the records of the central government agencies in Japan and the management of old government records of historical value⁶.

In reality, however, the NAJ has been powerless with regard to the following:

- Authority. The National Archives Law⁷ states that the Prime Minister of Japan, and not the head of the National Archives, controls the transfer of government documents of historical importance from each national government agency to the National Archives. Such a provision curtails the authority of the NAJ concerning the transfer of government records.
- Manpower. As of 2004, the staff of the NAJ numbers only 42—an extremely small number as compared with the national archives in neighboring countries (560 in China and 130 in South Korea). This problem of a small workforce is exacerbated by the lack of an accreditation system for professional archivists in Japan.

A “new deal” has recently emerged in the NAJ. First, in Jun. 2004, an advisory body of the Cabinet Office, which has close ties with the NAJ, submitted a report that advocated the empowerment of the NAJ and improvement in government records management⁸. Second, the NAJ has launched several new projects, including an international symposium on archives management in Nov. 2004⁹ and digital archive projects that will be discussed later.

Current Environment Surrounding Government Information Service Institutions in Japan

At present, due to the evolution of e-government, a large amount of government

information resources, including government publications and records, has been converted from paper to an electronic format.

This conversion has been facilitated by several policy initiatives in Japan. Of these, the e-Japan strategy, managed by the IT Strategic Headquarters since 2001, is the most important initiative. The e-Japan strategy facilitates the development of e-government as well as of IT applications in a gamut of social issues such as business, education and medication¹⁰. Further, the Administrative Management Bureau of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications assumes the responsibility of aiding the overall provision of government information on the Web¹¹.

Most recently, the e-Document Act was enacted in Nov. 2004 and came into effect in Apr. 2005. The purpose of this act is to enable private companies to preserve their documents and records concerning public activities, such as finance and tax, in an electronic format. While the object of the e-Document Act is the records management activities of private companies, it will significantly influence the records management of government agencies, which engage in several business activities with private companies and accept electronic documents from them.

In such a situation, government information service institutions have no choice but to introduce innovative services and expand their functions in the electronic environment.

New Projects in Japan

There are two approaches to managing government information in the electronic environment:

- (1) Retrospective digitization of historical publications and documents
- (2) Treatment of born-digital information

Based on these two approaches, the projects of the NDL and the NAJ are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Two approaches to managing electronic government information in the NDL and the NAJ

	Retrospective Digitization	Born-digital Information
National Diet Library	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digital Library from the Meiji Era Online exhibitions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Web-Archiving Project (WARP) New legislation plan
National Archives of Japan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (JACAR) Digital Archives project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Under consideration

(1) Retrospective digitization

Both the NDL and the NAJ are eager to digitize their current collections that are in paper format and provide access to the digitized collections on the Web; however, the

projects of NAJ seem to have more international appeal than those of the NDL.

The NDL provides access to a number of digital images of historical publications. Among its websites, its “Digital Library from the Meiji Era” site (Fig.1)¹², which was launched in Oct. 2002, is the most comprehensive collection site. It provides access to a database comprising approximately 55,000 digitized volumes of books published in the Meiji Era (1867-1912), whose copyright has expired, and also has a search function. Although this website offers only a Japanese interface and does not distinguish between government and non-government publications in its database, it is a powerful tool for research on historical publications in Japan. In addition to this digital library project, the NDL hosts “online exhibitions” of its digitized collection on its website, without a search function. One of the exhibitions entitled “Birth of the Constitution of Japan”¹³ provides access to digitized materials concerning the enactment of the current Constitution of Japan in 1946. The exhibition has both an English and a Japanese interface and includes digital images and texts of government documents, diplomacy records, and personal correspondence and diaries of political figures.

Fig. 1: Homepage of the NDL’s “Digital Library from the Meiji Era”



On the other hand, the JACAR, a branch of the NAJ, offers a unique website (Fig. 2)¹⁴ on the digitized diplomatic records of Japan. The JACAR was established in Nov. 2001 as a branch of the NAJ and as a digital archive “on the modern history of relations between Japan and various other countries, primarily neighboring Asian countries”¹⁵. The JACAR website provides access to the database of digital images of diplomatic records from the Meiji era to the end of World War II. The original historical records are stored in the NAJ, the Diplomatic Record Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and

the Library of the National Institute for Defense Studies of the National Defense Agency. As of Jan. 2005, 7,400,000 pieces of digital image are available on the JACAR website. The most appealing feature of the JACAR website is that it not only offers an English interface but also a catalog and access points in both English and Japanese. Thus, a visitor can search the database using English keywords or phrases although the records themselves are in Japanese¹⁶. In addition, in Apr. 2004, the NAJ launched its Digital Archive website¹⁷. This site offers access to a database of the NAJ's collection of 570,000 volumes of records with English and Japanese interfaces although the catalog is available only in Japanese. The website also provides access to 120,000 pieces of digital images from 2,500 volumes of records, primarily on post-war reforms since 1945.

Fig. 2: Homepage of the Japan Center for Asian Historical Records of the NAJ



(2) Treatment of born-digital information

In the treatment of born-digital information, the projects of the NDL seem to have made more progress than those of the NAJ, although both of them are in the initial stages of managing born-digital government information.

The main project of the NDL concerning born-digital government information is the Web Archiving Project (WARP)¹⁸, which began in Jun. 2002. This is a pilot project that

regularly collects selective Web content from Japanese sites on a contract basis. The sites covered by WARP include websites of electronic journals, national and local government agencies, quasi-government bodies, and universities. Of these, only a few websites of national government agencies were initially included in WARP. The number increased in Dec. 2004 due to the recommendation of e-Japan Initiatives although, as of Apr. 2005, several government agencies, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, do not permit the inclusion of their websites in WARP. As shown in Fig. 3, the WARP website currently provides only the snapshots of archived content and does not offer a search function for government website contents¹⁹.

Fig. 3: A part of the WARP website (Links to archived content of the website of the Geographical Survey Institute (GSI))



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Links to snapshots of archived content

- 2005年1月21日 収集
- 2004年10月5日 収集
- 2004年7月12日 収集
- 2004年2月16日 収集
- 2003年8月5日 収集
- 2003年6月30日 収集

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In addition to the WARP project, the NDL plans to establish a legal framework to include governmental and non-governmental websites in its collection. The report of an advisory council to the Chief Librarian of the NDL in Dec. 2004 concluded that a new legal framework for the web archiving system of the NDL should be established. It was also concluded that this new system should be independent of the NDL's current legal deposit system because compelling the public to register their websites may curtail the freedom of expression. However, the council added that the NDL should manage national and local government websites within a legal framework that is similar to the legal deposit system because the government does not face the risk of losing its freedom of expression. Based on this recommendation, a new legal system for Web archiving at the NDL will be established in the near future.

On the other hand, the NAJ's project for born-digital government information is yet to be established. In the electronic environment and an e-government era, the archive must deal with internal, non-published records, whose counterparts do not exist in paper

format. Such information includes e-mail messages and information available on the agency's intranet. The Jun. 2004 report of the advisory board of the Cabinet Office in, which has been referred to earlier in this paper, recommended that the NAJ and government agencies consider appropriate measures to maintain electronic records in the government. However, concrete measures are yet to be developed.

Challenges for Government Information Service Institutions: “Innovation beyond Institutions”

Comparing the two approaches of retrospective digitization and born-digital information management in Japan, the former appears easier to adopt. This is because government information service institutions can manage their collections in physical formats such as books, pamphlets, and documents and they can process (e.g., digitize) these collections and provide public access to them. Moreover, if government information is transferred to these institutions, the abovementioned activities become largely free of the control of the government agencies that provide such information. On the other hand, in the case of born-digital government information, government agencies, and not government information service institutions, tend to hold hegemony over the management of information; the content of government information (websites and records) can be altered and erased for reasons known to government agencies alone, and it is difficult for government information service institutions to follow and offset such alterations and erasures.

What then is required to facilitate innovations in both types of government information service institutions and thus enable both government staff and citizens to access government information? In the author's opinion, the idea of “innovation beyond institutions” is the key, i.e., government information service institutions should move ahead of their traditional roles as mere recipients of government information from government agencies. Instead, these institutions should be involved in the management of government information at an earlier stage such as during the production of government information.

For example, archives should be considered when developing a management system for electronic records. If this is not done, the transfer of electronic records from each government agency to the archives will be rather difficult since, as compared with records in paper format, electronic records are at a significantly greater risk of deletion and falsification by agencies, whether accidentally or intentionally. The “Guidelines for Managing Electronic Records from an Archival Perspective” by the International Council on Archives²⁰ stresses the importance of actively considering issues regarding archival at the earliest stage, i.e., when developing a records management system:

[A]n archive whose activities start only when records are transferred will confront numerous technical difficulties. Many of these difficulties could be eliminated or avoided if the archives could influence the records creators earlier in the life cycle [of the records].

However, this is not only applicable to government archives but also to government

libraries. In other words, unless the government libraries “could influence the records creators earlier in the life cycle” of government websites, i.e., unless they collaborate with the government agencies in developing systems to create and maintain government websites, it would be extremely difficult for the libraries to identify and archive the websites effectively. In this sense, collaboration in the management of information systems is a common challenge and strategy for both government libraries and archives. Of course, in order to realize this, it is necessary for government information service institutions to cooperate with and make recommendations to government agencies that control information systems.

In addition, it is much more necessary for government libraries and archives to develop a cooperative relationship in the electronic environment. Certainly, there are a number of differences between government libraries and government archives in terms of the treatment of government information, especially the cataloging of information (while government publications are cataloged by subjects, this is not acceptable for government records, which are usually cataloged by the agency and/or organization who produce the records). In reality, however, in the electronic environment, libraries and archives share common challenges and solutions such as digitization of collections, archiving and preservation of digital content, developing interfaces for digital content, and collaboration in the management of information systems. It can be stated that crossing the boundaries of the two types of institutions—government libraries and government archives—is another strategy of “innovation beyond institutions.”

Conclusion

At present, two major government information service institutions in Japan—the NDL and the NAJ—are in the initial stages of exploring their services in the electronic environment; they are, however, already providing access to a number of government information databases on the Web. While both the NDL and the NAJ are yet to adopt the abovementioned strategies toward innovations, i.e., collaboration in the management of information systems and cooperation between the NDL and the NAJ, such strategies for “innovation beyond institutions” will be required by both these institutions in order to establish their presence in the electronic environment and serve both government officials and citizens. Such strategic initiatives toward “innovation beyond institutions” will be applicable to government information service institutions in other countries and will heighten the value of government information service institutions and government information itself. This will then lead to innovation within these government bodies and society.

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